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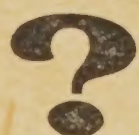


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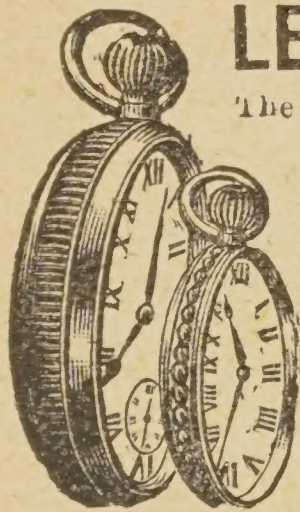
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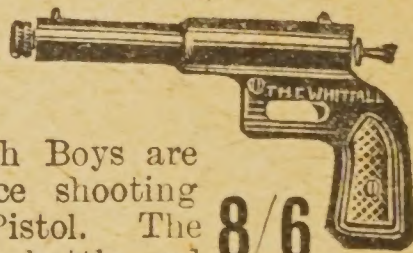
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Buffalo Bill in Silver City

Scouts' Stirring Adventures on the Trail of Stolen Treasure

CHAPTER 1.

A Rogues' Compact.

"I TELL you it is the only way; we must have the money or shut our doors."

Carlos Lerado, senior partner in the firm of Lerado and Brant, financial agents, of Silver City, leaned forward across the table and stared at his companion.

"I don't like it, Lerado, not a little bit. If we have to go smash it's only what we have been facing for the last six months, and we can shift our ground and start again; but the silver will hardly pull us through, anyway, and if the thing miscarries——"

"'If' the thing miscarries," retorted the other angrily. "It can't miscarry—at least, not if I have the arranging of the job."

"So you said over the San Domingo affair; but the result proved you as fallible as other men."

"And whose fault was that? If you hadn't shown the white feather, as you are showing it again, the San Domingo business would have turned out as I had reckoned it would."

"Well, I've a constitutional objection to putting my head in a noose. I don't mind an ordinary affair, as you ought to know by this time; but when it comes to a thing like this you'll admit that the penalty of failure outweighs all the advantages of success."

"Maldito! but you forget that the chances of success far outweigh those of failure. Properly managed we run no possible risk. We get the silver, which I admit would only just pay our heavy liabilities, but we also keep our good name and business, which form a valuable asset. Nobody knows our position. We are still the principal

house in Silver City, and with the enormous increase of business that is sure to come from the proposed railway there is a fortune to be made in the place later on. We have worked hard to get where we are, and I will do anything and risk everything to keep that position, and not lose all the fruits of our labour just when they are ripe to our hands."

"A bit over-ripe," said Brant bitterly. "As I said just now, I wouldn't back out of an ordinary job, but this is putting one's head into the noose with a vengeance, and the prize isn't big enough to induce me to run such a risk."

Lerado tapped impatiently on the table.

"I never thought Tone Brant would talk like that. What's come to you, man? Why are you, of all people in the world, showing the white feather? As to the gain, can't you see that it isn't only what we make on this deal, but what we make after? The Blanca Mine is increasing its output every month, and it is worth something to us to be its agents, to say nothing of the other properties which will be opened up in the near future. Suppose we get this deal through successfully, as I do not for a moment doubt, we shall keep all that business in our hands, and if we can't fleece some of the lambs who are taking up properties around it will be time to shut up shop with a vengeance. Come, what are you going to decide? If the thing is to be done there is little time to lose, but if you are afraid——"

He stopped and shrugged his shoulders. Brant started up, his face livid with anger.

"No one ever accused Tone Brant of being afraid, Lerado!" he cried in a harsh voice. "You know my reasons

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for not catching on to this job. The silver is to be guarded by fifty soldiers under Rodriguez, and we should want double our number of men to beat them, unless——”

He stopped suddenly, and sat down thinking hard, Lerado watching him between half-closed eyes.

“Is Zeph Hubbert in town?” Brant asked.

“Zeph Hubbert? Yes, I believe so; but what on earth do you want with him?”

“I’ll take the business in hand at once,” said Brant, without answering the question. “The stuff comes down in three days, doesn’t it?”

“So Vigas informs me. It gives you little time to make your arrangements, but enough perhaps.”

“It depends on Zeph Hubbert. If I can find him and he is in the proper mood you can consider the thing done.”

He jumped up again, lighted a big cigar, nodded to his partner, and left the room.

Carlos Lerado laughed as the door closed.

“That’s Brant all over,” he muttered. “Hard to move sometimes, but, once started, doubly hard to stop. He’s got some scheme in his head that I should never think of, and that I shall know nothing of till the thing is finished one way or the other. He’ll die now but what he’ll get hold of that consignment.”

He sat back in his chair, thinking of what the possession of the silver would mean to him. He and his partner were the sole agents for the great Blanca Silver Mine up in the mountains which towered above Silver City. It was their business to receive the consignments of precious ore which came down periodically, and see that they were transferred safely to their own vaults, or to the railway which had just been built to be conveyed to Mexico City.

Lerado’s father, as upright a man as could be found, had carried on the business for years, but he had died and left it to his son, who was the reverse of the old man in many ways. A confirmed gambler and rash speculator, he had nearly wrecked the business, only saving it on two or three occasions by

desperate means, which certainly would not bear investigation.

To help him in these schemes he had taken into partnership a man whom he had met in the gaming-rooms at Mexico City—an American as unscrupulous as himself. Both were clever men, and very few in Silver City had any idea what their real characters were, and in this way they had succeeded in keeping the business together.

The Blanca Mine agency was a valuable thing in itself, and the fact that they had it brought a good deal of other grist to the mill. But lately Lerado had been getting out of his depth altogether. Things had worked disastrously, and a large amount of the funds that were entrusted to the firm had been used to pay back some heavy losses through bad speculation and a disastrous run at the tables.

The time was nearly up when most of this money would have to be paid out to the rightful owners, and unless the calls be met nothing but ruin stared him in the face. He and Brant had talked the matter over and had determined on a desperate course. The usual consignment of silver would be coming down from the Blanca Mine in a few days, and they had determined to waylay the escort and capture the mule-train.

Ordinarily this would not have been such a desperate undertaking, as seldom more than a dozen guards accompanied the drivers. Lately, however, there had been one or two audacious “hold-ups” in the hills, and, as the next consignment of silver was to be an unusually big one, the mine-owners had availed themselves of the offer of the commander of the district to allow a detachment of cavalry that was crossing the Sierras to accompany the “conducta” as far as Silver City.

This arrangement, which the owners had acquainted their agents with, came as a shock to Lerado and his partner. To capture the silver would have been a perilous business, anyway, because of the risk of discovery; but now it seemed out of the question to attempt it. Brant had flatly declined to do so. Lerado, however, was desperate, and determined to make the attempt, seeing that it was

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absolutely the last chance he would have of staving off ruin.

Brant had proposed that they should wait till the bullion was in their own vaults and arrange to have the place broken open. But this involved all sorts of dangers. It would be impossible in the first place to remove so much silver in a short space of time, for the whole town would be alarmed long before they could get away, and they would have all the risk and trouble for nothing.

The amount that was coming down necessitated a train of about twenty mules, each mule being loaded with four thousand dollars' worth of silver. It was a prize worth a lot of risk; but the fact that the escort was so strong was well calculated to make anyone hesitate about undertaking to secure it.

Lerado knew well that Tone Brant was the man for the business if once he could overcome his natural caution, and he smiled to himself now to think that he had at last brought him up to the scratch. He could only wonder what his partner's plan was. Here again the man's caution was apparent, for he would say nothing, and Lerado would probably know nothing until the affair was over.

Well, he was quite content to let it go at that. The less anyone knew, even including himself, the better, and he could just play his part of the anxious agent and throw off any possible suspicions connecting him with the affair. He got up and went out, crossing over to the Laguna Hotel, where he generally took his meals.

There were many new people in the place, and he noticed that the table at which he generally sat was occupied by a party of four. He took a seat at the next table, taking up a paper to read till his meal should be brought to him. He noticed that his neighbours had been talking eagerly; but as he passed them they stopped, and two of them looked hard at him. They spoke but little, and then in such low tones that he could hear nothing for a few minutes, when they seemed to recover their gaiety, and laughed and talked incessantly till, their meal being concluded, they rose and left the dining-room.

At any other time Lerado might not have thought anything about them, but now, with his mind excited to the highest degree, he could not help thinking of the way they had ceased talking to one another, and of the sidelong looks which had been thrown at him. The subsequent laughter and talking struck him, too, as being forced and put on. A vague sense of uneasiness gradually grew upon him. He tried to put it off, thinking that it was occasioned by his state of tension, but it would not go, and at last, impelled by the desire to know something more of these strangers, he pushed back his chair and went to see what had become of them.

They were not to be seen. An inquiry of the office clerk resulted in the information that one of them was staying at the hotel, and an inspection of the book showed the name registered as William Washburn, Idaho. This, of course, was no help, and Lerado was forced to let the matter drop for the time. The men were gone, and all he could do was to wait till an opportunity offered to make their acquaintance and discover all he could about them. He went over to his office again, to find that Brant had just got back.

"It's all right," said the latter. "Hubbert is in town, and I have arranged everything with him."

"When do you start?"

"At two a.m. He can't be ready before then, and I have all I can do to get things in shape."

"Whom do you take besides?"

Brant drew a paper out of his pocket and handed it to Lerado, who read it through carefully. It was a list of names, amounting to fifteen men.

"Yes, they are all safe," he said, as he handed the list back, "but I think you are running an unnecessary risk in taking the two last. They are new and untried. Better keep them out of this sort of job till you know something more about them."

"You will notice that there is a mark against their names," Brant answered. "I think that they are sound enough, but Hubbert will decide that point to-night."

Lerado nodded. Knowing Brant as he did, he felt that he could safely

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leave the choice of suitable men in his hands.

"By the way," he said, "have you ever come across a man named William Washburn, of Idaho?"

Brant shook his head.

"Never heard of him. Why do you ask me?"

"I saw the man to-day at the hotel with three others, and for some reason that I cannot account for I've got it into my head that there's mischief brewing. He's go on my nerves. They seemed to know me, too, yet I swear I never set eyes on them before!"

"Shoo! you're getting nervous, Carlos. I thought you were too old a hand for such foolishness. You've been thinking so——"

He broke off abruptly and started forward to the window, standing at the side so that he could not be seen from the street, staring at a man who was walking slowly past on the other side.

Lerado followed his gaze.

"Talk of an angel!" he exclaimed—"that's the very man!"

At the sound of his voice Brant turned round, his face distorted under the effect of some powerful emotion.

"That's not Washburn, of Idaho," he said slowly. "That's Bas Rivers, of Sacramento. If he gets on my trail you may's well look for another partner. I'll go off, get the boys together, and make for the hills. Lie low yourself, Lerado, till you hear from me, and put Pip Horne on to Rivers's track. We'll get the silver and pull stakes for another section if you should find that Rivers is locating here."

He had been edging away towards the door as he spoke, Lerado watching him with surprise and alarm.

"If you don't hear from me by Friday you'll know that everything is working well," Brant added—"or I shall be dead."

Then he passed through the door and closed it behind him.

For about two minutes Lerado, without moving, gazed at the spot where his partner had been standing. Then he suddenly seemed to awake to the fact that he was alone. He ran to the door as if to call Brant back, but saw that

the outer office was empty except for the two clerks working at their desks, and he turned back towards the window.

As he did so a man passed close by along the pavement, and for a moment their eyes met. It was Bas Rivers.

CHAPTER 2.

How the Treasure Changed Hands.

THREE days after Brant left Silver City, Spencer Morris, part-owner of the Blanca Mine, stood at the door of the building which contained the huge "stamps" or machines for crushing the ore.

It was a scene of bustle and excitement that he gazed out upon. A number of men were busily engaged in strapping small hide-bound packages on to the backs of twenty-two mules.

The latter stood patiently in a long line, side by side, blinking in the heat of the powerful sun and flicking their tails incessantly, but otherwise scarcely moving. None of them were bridled, being merely furnished with a broad cinch or belt, to which were fastened two of the packages, one on each side.

Each package contained ingots of silver to the value of two thousand dollars, the whole consignment thus amounting to eighty-eight thousand dollars. It was the largest amount of silver that had been sent down at one time from the Blanca Mine, and it is not to be wondered at that the owners were anxious, and only too glad to avail themselves of the opportunity of a military escort.

Superintending the work was Frank McClure, the other partner, who, booted and spurred, with a brace of heavy revolvers hanging at his belt, was evidently prepared to accompany the train on the difficult and dangerous journey down the plains. He looked across and saw Morris.

"Time's getting on, Spen," he cried, drawing out his watch. "Rodriguez ought to be here soon. He'll find us ready, anyway."

"He won't be long now," said Morris, stepping forward and, in turn, inspecting each load. "Ah! there's the signal!"

He looked up to where a Mexican

HOW THE TREASURE CHANGED HANDS.

was standing on the hill above the mine, waving his arm. The cavalry detachment must be within a quarter of a mile, and the two partners bustled round, hurrying the men on with their work, so as to have everything ready by the time Colonel Rodriguez arrived. Then they walked to the gate of the compound and saw the soldiers filing down the steep path. Colonel Rodriguez soon rode up to them.

"You're well on time, colonel. Come in and have a refresher before starting down the hills. The men and horses will find all they want across the way there."

Rodriguez dismounted and followed Morris to where the mule-train stood ready to move away.

"A nice little haul that would be for someone!" he laughed. "There are a good many men within a hundred miles of this place who would risk a great deal to handle it."

"But there are not many who would risk an encounter with you and your men, colonel, and fewer still who would succeed if they did risk it."

"No, you're about right there, McClure, though it's a nasty road we have to travel. How long will it take us to get down?"

"Seven or eight hours, I should say. It is scarcely worth while to hurry, and you will reach the town before dark."

"Any more trouble lately round the hills?"

"One or two small hold-ups, I believe, just enough to show that men of that kidney are about, and to make one cautious of placing temptation in their way. There are places on the route to Silver City which are ideal ones for such gentry to try their tricks. The Devil's Mile and Pike's Canyon, for instance."

"Bad enough. But we are not likely to be troubled this journey."

The partners of the Blanca Mine chatted with the colonel while refreshments were being partaken of inside, and then Rodriguez and McClure went out, and the former said:

"It's time we were off. Call out the men, orderly!"

The bugle sounded the call the moment after; men and horses, refreshed

by their short rest, formed up, the mules were guided by their drivers out of the gates, and, with a rousing parting cheer from the assembled miners and employees, the long cavalcade went filing down the rough road which led from the upper plateau to the plains.

Rodriguez and McClure rode behind an advance party of twenty troopers; the long train of mules and their drivers came next, followed by a rear-guard of twenty-five troopers in charge of a young lieutenant. Whenever the ground permitted it several of the latter party rode out on each flank, and keen eyes searched the sides of the slopes, on the lookout for any desperadoes who might be rash enough to try conclusions with them.

The sun was long past the meridian when they reached the head of the narrow path which led down the side of Pike's Canyon. This is a descent calculated to try the nerves of most people, unless accustomed to mountain work. The canyon is scarcely three hundred feet wide, the sides going sheer down to a depth of a thousand feet. The pathway is a narrow ledge, partly natural and partly blasted out by the miners of the Blanca Mine, sloping gradually down the face of the precipice.

At many places it is only wide enough for one rider to pass at a time, and though the mules trod its rough surface with unerring ease, many of the troopers had to dismount and lead their horses, who snorted and perspired with nervousness. Strung out into a long line, the "conducta," seen from the opposite side of the canyon, must have looked like an immense centipede crawling down the face of the stupendous cliff.

Halfway down, another canyon, known as the Little Pike, cuts into the other at almost right angles, and the pathway zigzags back so that the rear-guard could see the leading files of the convoy far below them. There is another pathway running up the Little Pike at the junction, a much wider path, boulder-strewn and precipitous.

Frank McClure had sent a couple of troopers forward to examine this junction, for it was a perfect place for

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an ambushade. The men had gone some way up the path, but found all clear, and returned to the junction, riding on with their comrades after reporting to the colonel. The latter and McClure turned to descend the zigzag, the leading mules being about ten yards behind.

Suddenly, just as the leading mule had reached the turn, a shot rang out from the opposite side of the canyon, and the animal dropped, completely blocking the path.

"By Heaven, colonel, they're at us!" cried McClure, springing off his horse and running back up the path.

Another shot struck his horse the moment after, and the frightened animal dashed down the path right at the colonel, who was shouting to his men to mark the spot where the shots came from.

Rodriguez, warned by a shout from the nearest trooper, turned just in time to see his own danger, pulled his horse close up to the cliff, and McClure's mount passed him, but so close that his leg was badly bruised between the two saddles. The wounded horse swerved at the shock, missed its footing, and disappeared over the edge of the precipice. The canyon re-echoed now with the thunderous reports of the rifles, the sounds being magnified tenfold and repeated again and again, till they sounded as if a thousand cannon were being discharged.

McClure reached the turn just as his horse disappeared, when a voice from the other side of the Little Pike shouted to him to throw up his hands. He did so, but it was to warn the muleteers to turn back, for he felt certain that an attack would be made along the pathway leading up to the Little Pike, and that must be stopped at all costs. So long as the attackers were on the other side of the canyon the silver was safe. To reach it they must come by the Little Pike.

The instant McClure had thrown up his hands he dropped to the ground behind a boulder, a bullet passing through his hat as he did so. His rifle was turned instantly on his assailant; but though he knew pretty well where the man was, he could see no one.

Rodriguez at that moment appeared, his revolver in his hand, and his eyes ablaze with the light of battle.

"Throw down that gun, colonel!" came the command from the other side of the Little Pike. "We don't want to kill you or any of your men but if you give us trouble we'll wipe out the lot!"

The colonel's answer was a shot fired at a head projecting slightly round the corner of a boulder. Then his own arm dropped powerless to his side and his gun clattered on the rocks as a bullet fired from another quarter struck him above the elbow.

"Get down to your men!" cried the voice again, "and stop this foolin', or we'll send you down to the vultures!"

Rodriguez groaned, for he saw that the case was indeed desperate and hopeless. The attacking force were so skillfully placed that it was impossible to discover their exact whereabouts. Little puffs of smoke coming from the opposite side of the canyon, far above the level of his men, showed that every advantage was on the other side.

"It's no good fighting it out here, McClure!" he cried, seeing the mine-owner stretched out behind the boulder. "It will only mean the sacrifice of my troop. The rascals are too strongly posted."

"You're right, colonel. Order your men back. It is murder to compel them to stay. The silver must go."

Rodriguez ran to the bend. His men, all dismounted and firing from behind their horses, were doing their duty manfully, but it was easy to see that their case was hopeless. Four or five were lying dead or wounded, and a dozen of the horses were killed already. The mules, urged by the guides, were mounting the path behind. They might escape, but his men could not. He held up his hand as a sign of surrender, and shouted to the troopers to cease fire.

A cheer broke out from the other side of the canyon, and two masked men opposite to McClure on the Little Pike side sprang into view.

"Don't budge a finger, McClure!" cried one. "You've been covered all the time, and a sign from me means your death! Lay down your rifle!"

HOW THE TREASURE CHANGED HANDS.

McClure did so, seeing it was hopeless to resist. The man made a signal, and half a dozen men appeared in the path above him and came running towards the bend. In a few moments McClure was disarmed and bound, and the men passed on, two going to the head of the zigzag, where they stood with rifles ready pointed at the colonel and his troopers. The others pressed upwards towards the mules, and the tactics that had been at first employed were repeated. The riflemen on the opposite side, the moment the mules were turned round, had fired at the two leading animals, dropping them in their tracks and blocking the narrow path.

It was impossible for the rearguard to do anything. They burnt cartridges uselessly. Several of their horses were killed and others wounded; but it was evident that the attackers had no particular wish to kill the troopers. Had it been otherwise the small force could have been wiped out without a chance of retaliation.

It was plain that they were opposed by men who were deadly shots. They saw far below them the signal of Rodriguez ordering the others to cease fire, and knew that he had surrendered.

Immediately after the bandits appeared and came up the path towards them, turning the mules back again towards the Little Pike. Seeing that their comrades were helpless, the lieutenant, who had been anxious to fight it out, despite the colonel's surrender, reluctantly ordered his men to cease fire, and stood silently awaiting the approach of the four masked men. The foremost at length approached, stepping over the bodies of the dead mules and driving the Mexican muleteers before him.

"Your colonel has thrown up the sponge, lootenant!" he cried, "an' we'll not trouble you any further so long as you do as we tell you. You and the rest of the boys kin go back to the Blanca an' report progress. The others will be allowed to go on to the city. We'll stay right here with the mules to see as they don't git into the wrong hands. If you stop around longer than we think necessary we shall have to hurry you up some; but if you're wise

you'll jest know when you're beat an' make yourself scarce."

The man spoke with easy assurance, his companions leaning on their rifles and eyeing the lieutenant through their masks. He shrugged his shoulders, and without answering turned and passed the word to his men to retire. The bandits were complete masters of the situation. To refuse their order meant death to the whole troop. Silently his men obeyed and turned sullenly up the path, leading the remnant of their horses with them. Not till they were out of sight round a distant bend did the four men move, when they turned and slowly drove the mules down the path towards the Little Pike, having first shifted the silver from the backs of the two animals which had been killed.

McClure watched as the long line passed him and filed off up the steep path of the Little Pike. No one made any remark until the last man had passed. Then the one who had spoken to the lieutenant came up. He and his companion talked together in an undertone for a few minutes. Then he turned and faced McClure.

"You've been wise not to try to fight it out, McClure. We was bound to have the silver, an' ten times the force you had couldn't have saved it. But we don't want you. You're free to go on to Silver City. Don't worry about tryin' to follow us. We've got the stuff, an' we know how to keep it. Anyone tryin' to pick up our trail will be well looked after, an' you oughter know by this time that we're a hard crowd to buck against. Rodriguez ain't got fur yet, an' you can catch him if you're quick. You all will be watched till you git to the lower track, an' if anyone turns back or leaves the others it's Kingdom Come for him."

He had cut McClure free as he spoke, and now made way for him to pass down the zigzag. McClure had examined him keenly during the time, but there was little by which he could hope to identify him. He was thankful that he was to have his freedom, at any rate, and, knowing that it would be useless to say anything, he passed on to rejoin Rodriguez, inwardly vow-

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ing that he would make every effort to recover the silver or bring the "hold-ups" to justice as soon as ever he had the opportunity to do so.

CHAPTER 3.

On the Bandits' Trail.

CARLOS LERADO paced up and down his private office, casting anxious looks out into the street whenever he passed the windows. He seemed to have aged ten years since Brant left him, so much depended on the success of this desperate venture. If Brant failed to secure the silver it meant ruin, utter and irretrievable. Even if he succeeded in the enterprise there was the chance of future discovery.

Lerado did not fear any treachery amongst the men. All of them were tried fellows, and for months past had been working with him or Brant. The numerous small "hold-ups" which had been agitating the surrounding country for so long were carried out by them. The only two doubtful men had been eliminated from the list at the last moment.

Still, there was a large element of risk. Brant might be killed or captured, or their well-planned route for carrying-off the silver might be followed. There were a hundred chances of discovery which Lerado had laughed at before, but which now seemed to his fevered and anxious mind as only too sure to happen.

Then there was the sudden advent of Bas Rivers and Brant's evident but unexplained terror of the man. Lerado had tried to discover who he was and his object in coming to the town, but to no purpose. Several times they had met in the hotel or resorts, but Rivers persistently avoided all chances of talking to him.

Was it possible that some of Lerado's shady transactions were known, that he was suspected of complicity in the hold-ups, and, worse still, that some idea of the plot against the silver train was abroad? If so, the sooner he left Silver City the better, and yet he could not budge till he had learned something definite regarding the fate of his confederates.

It was nearly five o'clock when a commotion at the corner of Main and Tenth Streets caught Lerado's attention. Men were running hurriedly across the roadway and calling to each other. The hoarse murmur of an approaching crowd grew plainer every moment.

Instinctively the rogue guessed that the excitement was connected with the silver train. He seized a bottle of spirits and poured out a stiff dose, swallowing it at a gulp. The next moment the crowd poured into Main Street. In the centre rode several troopers, supported on their saddles by willing hands. Rodriguez, with his arm in a sling, walked by McClure's side. They came towards the house.

Lerado, gripping at the back of a chair, watched to see who followed the troopers. Was the mule-train safe? The last trooper came into view, and the crowd surged on behind. The mule-train was not there!

With a great gasp of relief Lerado sprang back from the window, seized his hat, and ran to the door to meet McClure. He was himself now, and could act his part perfectly.

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. McClure, what is the meaning of this?" he cried. "What has happened?"

McClure followed him into his room before speaking. The wounded colonel and troopers, with their comrades surrounded by most of the crowd, passed on towards the fort, half a mile out.

"The worst has happened, Lerado. We were waylaid in the canyon and compelled to surrender the silver to save the lives of the party."

Lerado listened with eager attention to the details of the fight. Apparently he was too distressed for words. Inwardly he was rejoicing at Brant's success. One thing alone puzzled him, and that was the location of the ambush.

He himself had advised Brant to utilise the natural advantages of Pike's Canyon, but his partner had decided against it on account of the difficulties of getting the mules away by a secret route. And yet, after all, the fight had taken place there, and with the utmost success.

"What do you propose to do now?"

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Lerado leant towards McClure as he put the question, his dark eyes glittering with excitement and triumph which must have given him away had his companion been in the least suspicious.

"We shall get out a force directly Colonel Rodriguez can do so and follow the trail."

"It will need some finding, I fear. Those mountains and rocky wastes hold their secrets close."

"We shall take out all the scouts we can find, and every volunteer to help if need were. There are some keen old hunters in the place, men who know the hills like a book. It will be difficult for a train of mules to get away without leaving some trace."

"I can put you on a dozen good men," said Lerado. "When will you start? This evening?"

"Yes, as soon as the new force is ready. We shall get back to Pike's Canyon so as to be ready to take up the trail with the first light."

Lerado nodded gravely.

"Then I must go at once so as to be ready with my men. Brant is away, unfortunately, or he would have accompanied us, too."

"Then you're going on the trail?"

"Certainly, McClure. I could not sit still here, knowing that you were venturing your life; and, as your agent, my place is with you."

McClure grasped his hand.

"It's only what I should have expected from you, Lerado. This loss will hit us hard. If we cannot bring the miscreants to justice others will be tempted to try the same game, and it will be impossible to work the mine except at tremendous cost in safeguarding the entire route. Let us get out and hunt up the men, so as to be ready for the colonel."

Lerado waited only to give some instructions to his chief clerk, and then passed out into the street. Numbers of people stood outside, and hundreds of questions were shouted at them as to the meaning of the fight. It was not known that the silver was being sent down, such information being always carefully withheld by the mine-owners for obvious reasons.

But McClure's presence with the troopers gave the clue, and the crowd clamoured for details. The mine-owner satisfied their curiosity to a certain extent. It soon became known that a strong force was going up into the hills to recover the treasure and capture the robbers. Every man in the place seemed anxious to join, and the only difficulty would be to make a selection.

Lerado was invaluable here. He was so confident that Brant would cover his tracks in such a way that the best scout in the world could not trail him that he had no fear in selecting all the best men. In half an hour a hundred men were waiting for the arrival of the troopers, and a tough-looking lot they were. Each man was heavily armed and mounted on a strong, wiry horse, and McClure felt it was scarcely possible that with such a force they could fail in their object.

Shortly afterwards Rodriguez and two other officers, with fifty troopers, rode up. Despite his wounded arm the colonel had insisted on accompanying the force. A rousing cheer was raised as the two parties met, and, after a short wait in front of the Laguna Hotel, rode off four abreast at a gallop towards the hills.

It was dark long before they reached Pike's Canyon; but they did not halt till that forbidding place was reached. Each man had provided supplies for himself and his horse, and they camped not far from the spot where the bones of the horses, already picked clean, lay at the foot of the precipice. Wrapped in their blankets they prepared to pass the night as best they could till dawn should enable them to follow the trail.

The colonel, kept awake by the pain of his wound, was lying gazing up at the narrow strip of sky visible between the towering cliffs, when he started up as a faint sound came down the canyon towards them. He listened, and, as the sound was repeated, woke McClure.

"There are horsemen coming down towards us," he whispered. "Pass the word for the men to be ready!"

In a few seconds every man was on the alert. Half a dozen of them crept forward along the base of the cliffs, Lerado himself leading the way. It

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was almost impossible to see a thing. No fires had been lighted in the camp for fear of putting the robbers on their guard, and the moonbeams scarcely penetrated to the bottom of the canyon.

The sounds told Lerado and those with him that they only had to deal with two men who seemed to be leading their horses. The agent believed them to be two of his own gang coming down to report to him. It was all-important that he should warn them of the presence of the soldiers, so as to prevent them from committing themselves. He left the others and crept away towards the centre of the canyon.

The footsteps were close on him, and he was just about to challenge when one of the horses tethered down the pass whinnied. Instantly the footsteps ceased, and Lerado could not hear a sound, listen as he might. He was about to move forward when a revolver was pressed against his temple, and a voice whispered to him to keep still.

"It is I, you fool—Lerado!" he whispered, startled out of his caution, and not in the least doubting that it was one of his own men.

"Then you can keep absolutely quiet, Lerado," answered the voice.

The man was behind him a little, and Lerado could see nothing.

"How many men are here?" asked the man.

"Rodriguez and a detachment, besides a hundred others," Lerado answered.

"What! Colonel Rodriguez here?" cried the other, with a burst of laughter. "Why, then, we're well met. I took you for a different kind of bird. Come on, Bill!" he shouted. "We've found friends!"

At the sound of his voice and laugh the other men came running forward. Lights were struck, and as Rodriguez ran up he recognised Buffalo Bill standing near Lerado, whilst Wild Bill Hickok was just coming forward, leading two horses.

"Cody, by all that's fortunate!" cried the colonel. "You're the one man of all others I should wish to have with us just now. What brings you here?"

"Business of importance, colonel. And might I ask the same question?"

"Yes, and get the same answer," laughed Rodriguez. "Come along back to the camp, and we can explain mutually."

Lerado had stood silent from the moment Buffalo Bill's identity was made known. He could have cut out his tongue for his folly in speaking as he had done. He could only hope that the scout had not taken notice of the words which, in the circumstances, must have sounded suspicious.

"By gad! you gave me a start, Cody!" he said; "but I thought you were one of the party, scouting as I was, who had mistaken me for a bandit."

Buffalo Bill appeared to accept the explanation, for he laughed and apologised for threatening Lerado with his gun, and was soon seated with them, listening to the story of the "hold-up."

"That all appears to fit in with my business," he said. "Wild Bill and I are on the trail of a remnant of the old 'Black Hand' crowd who used to work round Denver and the Green River country. They reappeared lately at Santa Fe, where they gave a lot of trouble, and we followed them down to El Paso. There we lost them; but, hearing there has been trouble lately on the side of the hills, we determined to try Silver City as a likely place for them to start business in. And, by Jove! it seems they have started business, too!"

"You think this is their work?"

"It looks very like it. Black Hand, as their leader was called, carried out a similar job in Central Mexico four years ago, but the silver was recovered through the treachery of one of his men, who got five thousand dollars for his information. Brant, I think, the man's name was."

"A curious coincidence," laughed McClure. "That's the name of my agent's partner. We'll hope it's a good omen, and the silver will be recovered again."

It was well for Lerado then that they were sitting in darkness. Something seemed to tell him that it was indeed Tone Brant who had figured in that episode, though his partner had never mentioned the subject. That

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was not surprising, however, for there were many secrets in Brant's life that he knew nothing about.

But what troubled him now was the fact of Buffalo Bill's having joined the party and the possibility, if they should meet Brant at any time, of his recognising him as the man who turned traitor to his fellow rogues in Mexico.

"Did you know Brant?" he asked.

"No. I never met him. I heard he went north, fearing the vengeance of his companions, and has not since been heard of."

As soon as Buffalo Bill heard the details of the raid he and Wild Bill decided to go with Rodriguez and follow up the trail. The colonel was delighted to have their invaluable help, and all the force, with the exception of Lerado, were equally pleased. There was no doubt in their minds that the silver would be recovered now and the raiders captured, and by the time it was light enough to see every man was anxious to start.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, followed by the colonel, McClure, and Lerado, went up the zigzag well ahead of the others, for the scouts wished to work the ground before the trail was spoilt. Buffalo Bill soon decided which way the train had gone, following along the side of the Little Pike to the plateau.

Here the tracks diverged in several directions, but this did not cause him any delay, for he and Wild Bill knew that the only two tracks over the mountains before them were practically impassable. But he sent parties of men to follow the trails up, whilst he galloped off with the rest of the force towards Wolf's Pass.

They at length reached a spot where a fight had taken place. That it had been a severe one could not be doubted from the blood-marks about. But the reason for it was not apparent. Cody and Wild Bill dismounted.

"The bandits must have quarrelled amongst themselves over the division of the silver," McClure said.

But Buffalo Bill could not agree with this. He and Wild Bill had worked all round the place and formed a quite different opinion.

"No, they have been waylaid by an-

other force. They camped here, or were resting, before tackling the pass, and another lot came up. The second band trailed them right from the canyon, the trail we have been following. Which side won it is impossible to say for certain, but I am of opinion that those who attacked you, colonel, and took the silver beat the second lot and carried them off. That should handicap them a good deal, and makes our chances of overtaking them so much greater."

Cody remounted as he spoke and galloped away up the pass, followed by the others.

Lerado was in a terrible state, though he made every effort not to show it. Who could this second party of men be? Suppose Buffalo Bill was wrong, and Brant's party had been beaten and the silver captured! He cursed Brant now for making the attack at Pike's Canyon, where there was only this obvious way of escape.

Lerado dropped behind the others a little so as to think the matter out. If Brant were caught red-handed with the bullion his own position would be desperate, for no one would believe that he was innocent of complicity. Border justice in those days was generally prompt to condemn first and try afterwards, and he could scarcely hope to escape once suspicion turned his way. He meditated escape already, when a way out of the difficulty presented itself to his active mind. As the idea formed he recovered his usual spirit, and, spurring his horse, caught up with the others.

Wolf's Pass runs for nearly forty miles through the hills without a single place where a four-footed animal can ascend the rugged slopes which flank it on each hand. That the mules had not done so was plainly evident from the trail, and it was also plain that they must have been driven on without stop the whole night to have got so far ahead.

Suddenly Buffalo Bill uttered an exclamation and pointed to an object some distance ahead. It was the figure of a man leaning against a boulder. As they rode close up the scout sprang down and ran forward.

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"He's dead!" he called out, after a brief examination. "Shot through the head! Do any of you know him?"

A spasm passed across Lerado's face. The dead man was Prescott, one of the most trusted of his band. He bent over the body to recover himself.

"I fancy I have seen him about the town lately, but don't know his name."

"Stop! What's this?" Buffalo Bill bent down and drew a paper from the dead man's hand. "'A present for Lerado,'" he read out. "What does that mean?"

Lerado went deathly pale and staggered back. His worst fears were confirmed. Brant's gang had been waylaid and the silver was gone! The rest of the party were staring at him, and McClure ran to his side, but he pulled himself together with an effort.

"I'm a bit unnerved by this business altogether," he said apologetically. "That is a covert threat to me, I suppose, the villain knowing that I am the agent for the Blanca Mine."

"That's it, of course!" responded McClure; "but what has this man to do with the silver?"

"That I really can't make out—unless he and the others who were fighting at the mouth of the pass are some of your friends from the mine who are trying to recover it," said Lerado.

"By thunder, that's what it must be!" cried McClure. "Come on, boys! Let's get on. We may be in time to help them yet."

He wrote a few lines for the rest of the party to find, begging them to hurry after them, and they galloped on again. For two hours they kept their horses hard at it, and the head of the pass was reached at last.

Every minute the tracks of the mules were getting fresher, until, just as the end of the pass was reached and a vast expanse of country lay spread out below them, Buffalo Bill, who was riding all the time in the lead, pulled up and signed to them to be quiet. They followed his looks, and saw two of the mules grazing along the slope close to the pine-woods which covered that part of the hills. No one seemed to be near them, but it was pretty certain the men could not be far off.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode forward, after begging the others to remain where they were. With rifles ready they approached the mules, which seemed scarcely to heed them, cropping the short, sweet grass with avidity. Then the watchers saw Cody beckoning to them. They galloped forward till they reached his side.

"Look here, McClure!" said the scout, pointing to another part of the slope which they had not been able to see before.

There, sure enough, were the rest of the mules quietly feeding, but the packages of silver and even the belts had been stripped off them.

"We've been following a blind lead all this time," said Buffalo Bill, "and while we've been rounding up that bunch of mules the men have been comfortably going off with the silver in a different direction."

CHAPTER 4.

Bad News for Lerado.

"Yes, it's a pretty neat trick, Bill. The man that engineered this business is no slouch, and we may consider ourselves lucky if we succeed in coming up with him at all."

Buffalo Bill looked up as he spoke from examining some marks on the ground.

It was the second morning after the discovery of the mules. The two scouts had effectually unravelled the mystery of that part of the story. Most of the animals bore the marks of severe punishment from a raw-hide whip. The weals went right across their backs and sides, showing they must have been stripped before the whip was used. That told the scout as plainly as if he had seen it that the silver was unloaded at some point away back in the pass, and the bunch of mules had been driven on so as to leave a blind trail. One, or perhaps two men, had ridden behind them and galloped them the whole way, urging them on with their cruel whips.

The only thing to be done was to find the place where the silver had been unloaded. This was doubly difficult now, for the soldiers and civilians who

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had been following them up the pass must have almost obliterated the original trail. But it had to be found somehow, and Buffalo Bill, with Wild Bill and the best trailers amongst the crowd, started to find it.

All that day they worked slowly back along the pass, examining the rocks on each side till night put an end to their work. The whole of next day was spent in the same way, till, just as the mouth of the pass was reached, a clue was found by Wild Bill. By that time the ardour of most of the volunteers had evaporated with their provisions, and they had returned to Silver City, convinced that the robbers had succeeded in covering their tracks completely.

Most of the soldiers had been sent back as well, Buffalo Bill only retaining a few who could return for reinforcements if the trail were found. McClure elected to stay with him, as did Lerado, who was consumed with anxiety as to Brant's fate and the whereabouts of the treasure.

Night put an end to the work again, but by daylight the two scouts were once more at work, going over the ground and keeping to the trail in a marvellous manner. So skilfully had it been covered that the other scouts and the mountain men were useless, declaring no one could possibly follow it out. But Buffalo Bill stuck to the task with bulldog tenacity, with the result that he and Wild Bill at last followed it out to a place where a number of horses had been tethered nearly three miles from the pass.

However, just as they were congratulating themselves on the discovery, they found that no trail led from the place, though that made by the horses in reaching the spot was plainly visible. Wild Bill had declared it was no use to go back on this old trail. The outlaws would never return that way, and Buffalo Bill thought so, too, till something queer about some of the hoofmarks struck him, and he made a more careful examination, which convinced him that this was really the new trail, for the horses had undoubtedly been shod backwards.

"Yes, it's a clever trick," he re-

peated, as he convinced Wild Bill and the others of the fact. "They blanketed the animals on the way here and on to the pass, where the silver was transferred, brought them to this place, and, probably thinking the blind was successful, cut the blankets and went off, trusting to this trick to complete the business."

"We'll hope it will, but not in the way they expected," McClure said, elated to think that the silver was now within reach. "We'll follow it out to the bitter end!"

It seemed that his hopes were to be realised, for after two hours' hard riding they approached a clearing in the pine-forest, in the centre of which stood a newly-built log-house of considerable size, flanked by another which looked like a stable. Smoke was issuing from the chimney at the side, and just as the party halted amongst the timber the door opened, and a man, with his head bound up in a blood-stained handkerchief, came out. He carried a pail, and walked towards a mountain stream which ran past the other side of the house.

Lerado's hands gripped his saddlehorn as he recognised one of his own band named Hine. Two or three of the men from Silver City also recognised him. He was a well-known character round the saloons, and bore none too good a character. But they dared not voice their indignation. Buffalo Bill had signed to all to remain quiet. He and Wild Bill then dismounted and slipped round through the trees till they were within a few yards of Hine.

That worthy had just dipped up a pailful of water when a low whistle made him look round, to see Buffalo Bill's revolver levelled at him, while the scout motioned to him to advance. For a moment it looked as if he meant to fight, but the hopelessness of such a proceeding made him alter his mind. He walked towards the scout, and in another minute Wild Bill had him secure.

"How many are there in the house?" whispered Buffalo Bill.

Hine refused to answer.

"Oh, well, never mind!" said the scout. "Take him back to the others,

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Bill, and tell them to surround the place."

Wild Bill slipped away, forcing Hine to go ahead, and the scout waited till he returned to say that his orders were carried out.

"Then stand ready to back me up. I'm going to investigate."

At that moment a voice shouted from the interior of the hut:

"Hine, oh, Hine, hurry up! What you waitin' for?"

"He's waiting for you!" cried Buffalo Bill, as he sprang to the door, both guns covering those within. "Hands up, the lot of you!"

A hoarse laugh greeted the order.

"Hands up, is it? Reckon I'd be glad to raise mine an inch. What's the excitement?"

"You'll find that out later on, perhaps," retorted the scout. "At present you'll line up against the wall there, and the first move to get your guns means death."

There were four men in the room, all more or less crippled, as sorry and desperate-looking a crowd as could be imagined. Their first stare of astonishment when Buffalo Bill appeared gave place to one of sullen indifference, and three, in obedience to his order, moved to the wall. The fourth was wounded in the leg, and could not stand. The moment he had them placed Buffalo Bill whistled shrilly, and Wild Bill came running to him.

"Just fix those fellows," said the scout, and, as soon as Wild Bill had secured them and removed their guns, Buffalo Bill advanced towards the one who was still seated.

"How many more are there with you?" he said.

"Reckon you kin figger that out fer yourself," answered the man surlily.

It was Zeph Hubbert who spoke, and he looked as if he'd been "through the mill" with a vengeance.

"Yes, I suppose I can," Buffalo Bill said. "The house is surrounded, and if any others of your crowd are around they can't hope to escape."

"Guess they wouldn't be in much shape ter try," growled Zeph, "if they'd bin used up as we is. What's your game, anyway?"

"That you know as well as I do," said the scout shortly. "Call up the others, Bill. I'm afraid the rest of the birds have gone further, leaving the wounded to recover."

"What other birds is you talkin' of?" said Zeph angrily. "There's no more than us boys aroun'. We had a bad brush with the Injuns night before last an' got a knock or two. Who d'you think we is, anyway?"

At this moment McClure, Lerado, and the others came crowding into the room. Lerado stared at the men as if they were perfect strangers, though he knew each one well as members of his and Brant's gang.

The Silver City crowd knew them, too, and a howl of indignation broke from them. Rodriguez stepped forward and stared at the prisoners.

"So these are the villains who shot at me and my men, eh?"

"Shot at you an' your men, colonel?" shouted Zeph angrily. "What's that you're givin' us? Why, I ain't set eyes on you for a couple of months, an' as fer shootin' at your men, I swar I don't know what you're talkin' of!"

"And if I were to mention the fact that the silver which came down two days ago was all stolen by your gang, I suppose you'd still know nothing about it?"

"Silver?" repeated Zeph, staring slowly round, with a powerful show of bewilderment. "P'r'aps you'll tell us what you're drivin' at? We all ain't in much shape to be kept answerin' kernundrums, as you kin see."

That this was a fact was only too evident. Zeph Hubbert himself, powerful man though he was, could scarcely stand, and the others leaned back against the wall, staring at the intruders with lack-lustre eyes. They were all suffering from wounds, and were greatly in need of surgical treatment.

Seeing it was useless to hope to get any information out of them, they were placed under guard, and the scouts and others searched the place for any signs of the silver. Not that they expected to find it there. They guessed it would be cached in some safe place, but some clue might be found.

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The stables proved to be empty, but had been used a good deal lately, and a number of horses had been tethered amongst the trees at different times. The trails to and from the clearing were numerous, but the chief one seemed to lead down towards Silver City, and the tracks of cart-wheels showed that they had brought their stores out from the town.

Whilst they were searching round Lerado had stayed near the log-house, eaten up with anxiety to know what it all meant. Brant's plans seemed all to have been altered. He had arranged to run the silver in quite another direction, and now Lerado had no idea where it could have been taken.

The rogue feared that Brant was proving a traitor to him, as he had done to other pardos in Mexico, and he grated his teeth in rage at the thought. He must contrive somehow to speak with Zeph or one of the others and find out the meaning of it all without raising suspicion. An opportunity occurred very soon, one of the prisoners reeling back from his seat in a dead faint.

Lerado ran forward to help, telling the guards to keep on the watch outside. He helped Zeph to raise the man, and saw that one of the bandages on his arm had slipped and he was bleeding freely. With skilful hands he replaced the bandage, Zeph aiding him, the other prisoners standing round.

The four troopers were now outside the door, and Lerado was able to gather from Zeph enough to tell him the true state of affairs. Another force of bandits had captured the silver, and Brant, discovering this, had followed their trail with his own band—only to be ambushed and annihilated at Wolf's Pass. Brant himself had been carried off or killed. The unknown leader of the other band had allowed the wounded men to remain at the shack, as he did not wish to encumber his own movements with them.

But one thing that Zeph whispered set Lerado's heart beating. He declared he knew where the treasure was being taken, and if Lerado could contrive his escape he would guide him to it. The latter's mind was made up instantly.

"Be ready for anything that turns up," he whispered, as he rose from his knees just as the colonel and McClure entered the room.

"What luck!" he asked, as he approached them.

"None at present. Cody and the other scouts are trying to pick out the right trail; but there are so many that it will take a long time to decide which is the right one."

"And, meanwhile, these men are all badly in need of proper treatment," said Lerado. "That one that I have just been bandaging is in a bad way. They ought to be carried down to the town."

"It would be safer to send them off, anyway," answered Rodriguez. "We can't leave them here without sufficient men to guard them in case their friends return for them. Can they sit on horseback?"

Zeph, who overheard the question, declared it was impossible. They were none of them fit to be moved, he said, unless the colonel wished them to die on the road.

"They are expecting to be rescued," whispered Lerado. "That rascal is strong enough to ride, anyway, and I should imagine that the others are, too."

Zeph's evident wish to remain made Rodriguez think this was the real reason, and as he had no desire to risk losing them or to weaken the force by leaving men to guard them, he determined to send them back to the town without delay.

Despite their protests they were mounted on five of the troopers' horses, the soldiers walking at the heads of the animals with the bridles over their arms. Two others went with them to guard against any surprise, and the party filed away in the direction of Silver City.

"We are well rid of them," Rodriguez said as they disappeared. "Now we are free to concentrate our efforts in discovering what has been done with the silver. Let us join Buffalo Bill and the others in their search."

He remounted, and, followed by McClure and Lerado, galloped off into the forest.

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CHAPTER 5.

The House in the Wood.

"HALLO, Cody! Have you found the trail?"

Colonel Rodriguez and several others were standing together, when they saw the scout running towards them.

"Well, that remains still to be proved. But we have hit on something that looks uncommonly like it. We shall want every man. The band seems to be stronger than I had expected. Where's McClure?"

"Went off with Lerado to search the woods to the south. He can't be so very far off."

"Then they can come on after. Send a man back to the shanty to tell—What's that?"

Every man gripped his gun at the sound of a distant shot.

"They've found something, with a vengeance. Listen!"

Two more reports, followed by a fourth, came from the same direction.

"Go back, Tom, and collect the others," cried Rodriguez, "in case they haven't heard!"

He and the rest of the men galloped after Buffalo Bill, who was already running swiftly in the direction of the firing. He lost sight of the scout amongst the trees, but a few minutes after came upon him kneeling by the side of McClure.

"Is he dead?" he cried, swinging himself out of the saddle.

"Not quite," and as the wounded man opened his eyes the scout bent down.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"Lerado——" began McClure, but relapsed into unconsciousness directly.

Buffalo Bill sprang up and ran swiftly along the trail of the two horses. A couple of hundred yards further on he found Lerado's horse lying dead. The bushes all round were broken and trampled, as if a struggle had taken place, but the ground was hard, and carried few impressions. The trail of the second horse was all Cody had to go by, and this led him on to a tract of rocky country, where he lost it again. He returned to his companions.

"Lerado has been carried off!" he

cried. "His horse was killed. It looks to me like the work of one man. I lost the trail, but have no doubt it can easily be picked up again. McClure must be taken to the shanty. There is one chance in a thousand for him."

McClure was carried on a quickly-improvised stretcher and laid on one of the bunks as soon as they reached the shanty. Here Buffalo Bill and the colonel dressed his wound as well as they were able, but the mine-owner still lay quite unconscious.

"Half a dozen men had better be left here to look after him," said the scout. "You, Pete, must ride into the town and bring out a conveyance to carry him in. I should be glad if you, colonel, would go with the rest of the men and catch up with Wild Bill. You can't miss the trail. He is waiting there for me, and the sooner you make a start the better it will be."

"And what are you going to do, Cody?"

"I am going to find Lerado."

"Alone?"

"Yes, colonel."

"But supposing he has been killed?"

"In that case I shall catch you up. But I don't fancy he is dead. Tell Wild Bill I am convinced that it is the right trail, and to follow it up as fast as you can travel."

Buffalo Bill waved them an adieu and galloped away on his lonely quest. He was soon back at the place where Lerado's dead horse lay, and from that point he made a more careful examination than he had at first. And with far greater success, although he soon saw that the man who had gone off had done all he could to cover his tracks. A mile from the spot, however, he had turned again to the woods, perhaps satisfied that no one could follow him to that point.

Buffalo Bill could now make up for lost time, and he did not seem surprised when the trail he was following ran into that of the prisoners and troopers who accompanied them. He only rode the faster, the thick carpet of pine needles deadening the sound of the hoofs. He noted some time later where the rider had turned off again, but quickly ascertained he had

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but ridden parallel with the larger track; so, returning to the latter, he galloped on till the dead body of a horse appeared lying just off the trail.

A few yards further and the ground appeared trampled all over, and lying at some little distance apart were two of the troopers, stone dead. One of them still grasped the reins and bridle, the latter of which had been cut. There were the marks where five or six horses had galloped off in various directions. A little further on the bodies of two of the prisoners lay close to that of one of the troopers.

"The boys made a fight for it," muttered the scout. "I wonder what has become of the others? Chasing the runaways, probably. I'll stick to the first trail, anyway. Lerado's responsible for the mischief, and the others can wait till I have laid my hands on him."

A mile further on he found the body of another of the prisoners, who had evidently fallen from his horse and succumbed to the wounds he had received in the former fight. The troop-horse was grazing close by, and followed Buffalo Bill as he rode on. To the scout's surprise, the trail turned away from the hills, going by a roundabout way towards Silver City.

"He can't surely be going there," thought the scout—"unless the silver has been sent to some place near and not been taken into the hills at all."

The idea was strengthened as the trail crossed the coach-road to the city and led through the densely-wooded country to the west of the town. Here the scout deemed it more prudent to leave his horse and proceed on foot, for he guessed that at any moment he might come out on some shanty or place of retreat. He was right in his conjecture. The trail ran into a well-worn cart-road which led him in sight of a frame-building, surrounded by several smaller ones. The land beyond was partially cultivated, but looked neglected and overrun with weeds.

A couple of men were standing near the door, talking to a third, who was seated in a crazy-looking buckboard. Buffalo Bill knew none of them, but a few minutes after a fourth man came

out, and the scout recognised him instantly. It was Zeph Hubbert, dressed in different clothes, and armed with a brace of revolvers. He spoke to the man in the buckboard for a few minutes, when the latter whipped up his horse and drove off towards the city. As soon as he was gone the others went into the house, shutting the door behind them.

"So far so good," thought the scout, "but I must find out a little more before I can get down to business with these gentry."

He passed through the wood till he got opposite one of the detached buildings which masked his approach to the house. He was now at the rear of the main building. Three windows facing that way made it difficult to get nearer without being seen. A window at the side seemed to offer a better chance, but it was too high to reach. There was no ladder to be seen, only a pile of fence-rails, newly split, lying close to him. He lifted a couple, reached the side of the house, raised the two rails underneath the window, and, with a quick glance round, climbed up till his fingers grasped the window-ledge.

Buffalo Bill waited, listening, but heard nothing to make him think that the room was occupied. Then he raised himself up and found that the window swung outwards to his pull. In another minute he was inside the room. All his movements had been so carefully and deliberately made that no alarm had been raised, and, as luck would have it, he found that the inmates were not on that side of the building, so that his movements were entirely unheard.

The room opened out on to a landing. Buffalo Bill paused at the head of the stairs and listened. Several men were talking, and the scout passed out along the landing and went into a room which he fancied was over that in which the men were sitting. The sounds underneath told him this was so. Two of the boards yielded noiselessly as he raised them. There was a matchboard ceiling to the room underneath which prevented him from seeing who the men were, but their voices were now plainly audible.

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"Say, they'll take two hours to get here," one man was saying, "then five hours' ride from here, goin' the way we shall have to take, and that'll get us there just after dark. We couldn't attack them before, anyway; so it just fits in nicely without any hurry."

"Yes, an' gives them two blame scouts the chance to run the trail right through," growled another. "We oughter have killed them, anyway. The rest is no 'count, but with the two trailers on us we shan't be safe a minute."

"You talk like a book, Pepe," said a deep voice, which Buffalo Bill instantly knew was Lerado's. "But shooting Cody or Wild Bill is not a job you'd be very likely to perform unless they were safely tied up for you. However," he added, "in my opinion they're safe enough. They and the rest are following the mountain trail, never dreaming that the silver is down in the plains within thirty miles of Silver City. By the time they have found out their mistake we shall have got our hands on it and be safe from pursuit."

"And suppose they follow your trail instead?"

"Not they! Some of them will perhaps find McClure and the others, as I intended they should. But they will only think that the guard was attacked and is chasing you. Whilst I, of course, must have been captured or am chasing you, too. Ha, ha! it's as good as a play. Poor Lerado, after trying to defend McClure, is carried off by the silver thieves! It'll look well in the 'Journal,' as soon as the reporters get hold of it."

"And s'posin' you didn't kill McClure? S'pose he's alive and tells how you shot him? That won't be quite sich pleasant reading for you, I reckon."

"And suppose I put a bullet through you, you croaking fool?" said Lerado, furiously. "You ought never to have joined in the job. You've not got the pluck of a mouse. McClure's dead enough, and after I shot the soldiers I laid such a trail that all the scouts in the world wouldn't follow it."

"You're a peach, boss, and no mistake!" cried another man. "There's

not a fellow in the whole West that would have tackled the job as you did it. It makes me laugh now to see the sogers jumpin' this way an' that, not knowin' which one to follow first. Reckon they're wanderin' through the hills, still lost to the world. But, for all that, I shan't feel safe till we've got the silver and are well over the border. Let's hope that part of the biz'll go as slick as this."

"It'll do that if you boys put up anything like a decent fight," said Lerado. "I'm not saying anything about the last fight. You put in as good a show as you could. But you may bet these men won't part with the silver as long as they live, and it'll be the stiffest fight you ever saw. There's Brant, too. He's got to be rescued if he's still alive. I wonder why they carried him off instead of leaving him with you all at the shanty?"

At that moment a call sounded outside the house, and the men jumped up and left the room. The scout had listened to the talk with interest. The latter part showed that he had been right in his idea that Lerado had shot McClure and been instrumental in rescuing the prisoners.

One or two things that he had noticed had made him suspicious of the man, and the moment he discovered McClure and examined the trail he had formed the conclusion that Lerado was at the bottom of the whole mischief, and therefore determined to capture him. But the last part of the conversation was a mystery. He had naturally concluded that Lerado and his men had captured the silver train, and that the bullion was in the care of some of the band.

From what the scout had heard this could not be so. On the contrary, they were now organising an attack on some unknown men who had done the whole thing and carried the silver off. This was certainly the last thing that Buffalo Bill had dreamed of, and made his position extremely difficult.

All ideas of holding up the men below had to be put aside. They apparently knew where the treasure was, and the only thing Cody could do was to follow

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them so as to discover the place for himself. But how was he to let the others know? It would be an almost impossible task to take the gang single-handed after their reinforcements reached them. And yet he could not leave them for a moment now till he had found out their secret.

Buffalo Bill waited anxiously for the men to return. They were talking outside the house. If he could only find out their destination there could be no necessity to remain any longer.

Presently he left the room and crept to the window by which he had entered the house. Three or four men were standing near one of the outhouses in full view. He could not get out that way unless they moved off. He turned to look for a place to hide in should occasion arise. There was another door on the other side of the landing. He opened it and looked in. A man was lying on a bed close to him with his back towards the door. His head and shoulders were swathed in bandages, and he groaned as if in great pain.

"That you, Zeph?" he queried, as the door creaked on its hinges. "For the love of Heaven git me some water!"

The scout advanced and leaned over him, placing a hand over his mouth to prevent him from crying out.

"I'll get you some water if you lie quiet," he whispered. "Speak above a whisper and I'll have to end your suffering quick. I'll not harm you if you lie still."

The look of terror that came over the man's face told Buffalo Bill that he was recognised. He drew his flask and held it to the man's lips. He drank greedily.

"Now, pard, we've got to talk quick. You're in a bad way, and will be worse if you're not attended to. I'll not harm you if you will help me. Tell me all you know of this affair, and you shall be counted out of it. Try to get me into trouble, and you know what will happen to you."

"D'you mean it, Cody? You'll act square by me?"

"I will as soon as ever the treasure is recovered."

"Then I'm your man. Those brutes have left me to die in here without

so much as giving me a drop of water. They would be glad to see me peg out so's they kin git my share o' the swag. I heard as much when they brought me here."

He fell back exhausted, but revived a little after another drink from Cody's flask.

"Tell me all you know," said the scout; "and especially where the silver has been carried to, if you can."

In a short time Buffalo Bill was acquainted with the story of Lerado's plot and how he had been foiled by another gang. Who the other leader was the wounded man could not say. After the fight at the pass all his party except Brant had been sent off under the charge of four masked men, and were left at the shanty up in the hills. One of these men turned out to be an old crony of Zeph's, and they had talked a good deal together.

"I was close to them most of the time, but was supposed to be insensible. They spoke so low I couldn't hear all that was said; but I heard enough to know that the silver was not going up to the hills at all, but was packed off by Indian carriers to a place just outside Arispe. From there it will probably be carried down the river to Guaymas or one of the towns on the Gulf."

"And you don't know who the leader of the band is?"

"No; I never heard the name. But I believe that he's got it in bad for Lerado's partner, and set almost more store on capturing him than on getting hold of the bullion."

This information set Buffalo Bill thinking again. It gave him a clue to the man's identity, and also to the place where the silver was carried. He could now act independently of Lerado and his gang and capture them later on.

"The men below are setting out for that place very soon," he said. "I'll see that you are well looked after and don't get into trouble for your share in the business. Don't let on to anyone who comes for you that you have seen me."

The wounded man promised, and the scout left the room. The time had

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passed rapidly during his long talk, for the story had been told slowly, with many pauses, owing to the exhaustion of his informant.

As Cody neared the window at the end of the passage he heard a commotion in the rooms beneath and a clatter of hoofs outside. The messenger had returned, bringing half a dozen tough-looking fellows with him, and half a dozen extra horses. They were welcomed boisterously by the rest of the gang, and invited in to wash the dust out of their throats.

Now was Buffalo Bill's opportunity, which he was not slow to seize. He opened the window, swung himself down till his legs gripped the rails, and slipped noiselessly to the ground. Then he ran swiftly towards the place where he had left his horse. He found it all right, and led it away from the path leading to the house, plunging into the woods till at last he came to a little-used bridle-path, mounted, and galloped away in the direction of Silver City.

CHAPTER 6.

The Treasure Recovered.

REUBEN SHIRES, Marshal of Silver City, sat talking with his deputy in his office. He had been absent at the time of the robbery, and had only just returned. On hearing that no news had been received from the hills he had become more than anxious, and was now making arrangements to go off with a posse to find out what had happened.

There was a clatter of hoofs on the road outside, a horse was pulled up at the door, and Buffalo Bill, hot and dusty from his ride, entered the room.

"Ah, Cody! You are the very man I wanted to see. What luck have you had?"

"A very little and a great deal!" laughed the scout, as he sat down and threw his hat on the table. "We've not got the silver or the men who stole it, but I think that a very few hours should put us in possession of both. But you've got to help me."

"That's what I'm here for, Cody. Tell me what you want, and if Rube Shires can do it you may bet on him."

"Well, it's a queer enough story, and

I am only just beginning to get at the rights of it all myself."

The scout detailed all that had taken place and the discoveries that he had only just made as to the real robbers and the place where the silver had been taken. The story of Lerado's treachery astounded the two listeners, and they expressed themselves pretty forcibly as to the fate which would be his should he again set foot within the city limits.

"And now what do you propose to do, Cody?" asked Shires.

"I am going off as soon as I can get a fresh mount to Arispe. These men must not be lost sight of now. I want you to get a force of men ready to follow me with as little delay as possible, and I also want you to send some men up into the hills to bring Wild Bill and the others down. They will be hunting along that blind trail or trying to track me, and wasting precious time. I will tell you where to meet me at Arispe. I am not at all certain of the place where this man hangs out. He may not be the one I imagine at all. Give me a bit of paper."

The deputy passed a piece, with pen and ink, and Buffalo Bill rapidly drew a small map, giving exact points as to the route to be followed by the posse and where he would meet them.

"There, all you have to do is to follow that, and you can't go wrong. The house I suspect is just here, a quarter of a mile from the meeting-point. You must be quite certain that the men, if they are there, don't escape to the river. Once they succeed in doing that we shall have difficulty in finding them again, as boats are few and far between at that part. As regards Wild Bill, I want him to ride straight there. The others will have had enough of it by the time they get down; but with your posse and Wild Bill we shall be enough for that crowd."

He rose to go, but the marshal persuaded him to stay long enough to have some food, while he himself went out to get Buffalo Bill a fresh horse.

"We'll be there by sundown, Cody," said Shires, as the scout sprang to the saddle. "The direct road would be quicker, but I suppose it will be safer to go the way you suggest?"

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"Better in every way. The other rascals may conclude to take the direct road, so as to carry out the job more quickly. Take the best shots you can lay hands on. There'll be some straight shooting before we are through with it."

"Don't worry about that," said Shires, smiling. "We'll give them all they want in that line."

A wave of the hand, and Buffalo Bill spurred down the roadway, followed by many a cheer from different groups of men who recognised him. The horse that he rode was a good one, with a long, stretching gallop which seemed capable of keeping up for an indefinite period, and the scout soon reached the path where he had entered the wood and turned down it. A faint shout reached his ears as he left the road.

"The rascals have been watching and set a lookout," he thought. "That's as I hoped. They'll think I am riding to the farm, and will lay for me there."

After continuing down the path for some little distance, he turned off and rode away through the trees in the direction which he judged would bring him out to the wild chaparral land considerably north of the farm. He halted at the edge of the wood for a minute, adjusted a saddlebag, and was about to ride out on to the open plain when a rough voice behind ordered him to throw up his hands.

Buffalo Bill drove spurs into his horse, and the animal leaped forward. At the same instant the scout turned in his saddle to fire at his unknown enemy, only to see Wild Bill sitting composedly on his horse not fifteen yards away.

"Is that the way you keep a lookout in the enemy's country?" laughed Wild Bill. "I could have shot you a dozen times!"

"Where on earth have you sprung from, Hickok? I thought you were miles away up in the mountains."

"So I was till I got it into my head that we were on the wrong trail all the time. It was too transparent altogether to please me, so I came back, heard of your little adventure, and calculated I'd follow you to see that everything was square. I was on your

track when you passed the coach road just now and saw you going into the wood. I hailed you, but supposed it was too far for you to hear me, so I just came after you."

"And glad enough I am to see you, Bill. Yes, I heard that shout, but only faintly, and thought it was a signal of the rascals I'm after now. Are you good for a stiff gallop?"

"Well, if you're going for one, I guess I am, for I'm not going to quit you just yet. You've got something up your sleeve, and I'm going to have some of the fun, you bet."

It did not take long for Buffalo Bill to explain how matters were. Wild Bill was a bit staggered at the unexpected turn of events.

"There's no doubt in my mind, Cody, that the rascal we trailed as far as Silver City is the mainspring of the whole thing. The fact of his taking so much trouble with Brant proves that. But I fear we shan't get him or the bullion either this trip. You may bet he's halfway down the Yaqui River by now, and all we shall get will be that consummate rascal Lerado and his choice lot of scoundrels. They're not worth the powder and shot."

"That's got to be proved, Bill. If we find Rivers has gone we'll leave Lerado and his gang for the marshal and go after our original game; but if he is still there we shall have to corral both parties."

"Or let them fight it out amongst themselves, and we can just rope in the winners, eh? It'd save a lot of trouble, and rid the country of a few dangerous ruffians at the same time."

They were galloping neck and neck as they talked, both keeping a keen lookout. But they saw no one, and kept steadily on till at last they neared Arispe. During the ride they had matured their plans, deciding to approach the place from different quarters, and acting at first independently till they had found out how the land lay.

To begin with, Buffalo Bill had yet to determine for certain if the house he thought of was the right one. Some years before he had had dealings with the owner, and knew him to be a villainous old Mexican, and a friend of

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Bas Rivers, the Black Hand, the man whom he and Wild Bill were so persistently tracking. He had intended, before this affair, to pay the place a visit on the chance of finding his man there, and now everything pointed to the likelihood that Bas Rivers had carried out the daring robbery and had secreted the silver at the place.

The house, a partly-ruined old Mission building, lay about a mile to the south of the town, and not very far from the Yaqui River, which at one time, before its channel changed, flowed close past it. A dense wood of live-oak screened the building from the land side, but the land between it and the river was cultivated, and the golden corn came nearly up to the walls.

The scout and Wild Bill dismounted three-quarters of a mile from the place in a dense chaparral, and made their way towards the road which Lerado and his men would be almost sure to travel. There were no fresh hoofmarks in the soft sand. They had not passed so far.

"We must tackle the Don and his people before they get here, Bill. We've got a free hand now before sunset."

They separated, and Buffalo Bill gained the oak wood, where the foliage was so dense that no glint of the evening sunlight came through the trees. It was almost as if night had already come on. The scout kept along parallel with the main path till the white adobe walls of the building rose before him. The gateway was empty; but two or three peons loafing in one corner of the courtyard prevented all thought of entering there.

Further on the ruined part of the building offered a better chance, and, turning to the southern side of the walls, Buffalo Bill saw there were several places where he could enter. In a few moments he was inside, passed through a low doorway, and traversed a long, narrow apartment to another door. This yielded after a considerable amount of persuasion.

A man was singing to the accompaniment of a guitar in one of the rooms leading out of the corridor on which the door opened. Other voices came from another room, showing that quite a number of people were in the

building. The corridor was badly lighted, but the sunlight, seen through a door at the further end, showed that it led to the river-side of the house.

Loosening the revolvers in his belt, Buffalo Bill stole forward towards the nearest room. Four men were sitting at a table near the window at the further end of the room. A door led out into the courtyard, and another man, a villainous-looking Mexican, leaned against the doorpost watching the four, who were engrossed in a game of cards.

The man facing the scout was Angelo Frio, the owner of the place, whom Cody recognised at once. Two other Mexicans sat at the sides, but the man with his back to the scout was an American, who had been losing heavily, to judge by the pile of chips lying near the other players and his own depleted stock. Suddenly he looked up through the window, uttered an exclamation, and threw his cards down.

"Enough of this!" he cried. "The sun is nearly down and there's much to do. Call the men, Concho, and we'll to work."

His face was now turned so that Buffalo Bill could see him, and the scout smiled grimly as he saw that it was Bas Rivers himself. But he had only time to make sure of that fact and get back to the dark end of the corridor as Concho, one of the players, came out of the room, shouting for their companions. The sound of the guitar ceased, and half a dozen men lounged out of the further room and came towards Concho, who beckoned them in to where Bas Rivers was waiting.

For a few minutes the murmur of voices continued, as if the leader were giving orders, and it was not till they ceased that Buffalo Bill ventured to move. He was sure now of his man, but it was necessary to let Wild Bill know what he had discovered. That the silver was in the place was not to be doubted, and from what Rivers had said the scout judged that it was to be carried away from there that night under cover of darkness.

Cody managed to get out of the building without betraying himself, and he soon reached the shelter of the oak

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wood. Without delay he then proceeded to the place where he had agreed to meet Wild Bill; but to his disappointment he was not there.

Cody determined to look for him at once, as no time was to be lost. He searched about for a while, and had got just opposite the main gateway of the Mission, when a loud outcry broke from the building, followed by the rapid discharge of firearms. He ran towards the gate, feeling certain that Hickok had been discovered. He saw some peons rushing into the house, and noticing no one about the courtyard he rapidly crossed it and entered the door.

The noise seemed to have quieted down a little, but there was a confused murmur of voices coming from the back part of the house. He passed through two empty rooms, which brought him to an inner court, surrounded by orange-trees and a ruined fountain in the centre. At the opposite side was a crowd of men, and several others came running from a corridor towards them. They were all crowding round someone, and just as Buffalo Bill was moving forward to see who it was they parted, and he saw Bas Rivers and Angelo Frio standing in front of Wild Bill, who was bound hand and foot. The Mexican gave some order, and Wild Bill was dragged into an open doorway, followed by most of the crowd. The rest, laughing and talking, came across the court.

Buffalo Bill slipped away amongst the orange-trees. He was at a loss how to proceed. To attempt to attack these men and rescue Hickok would be worse than useless.

As he racked his brains, trying to hit on some scheme which would bear the remotest chance of success, he saw by the dim light of the lamp hanging in the centre of the court a shadowy form stealing past the trees not far from him. He watched the newcomer intently, saw him straighten up and hold up his hand. Then two more men crept to his side. One of them was wearing a plainsman's hat, as were the next two who stealthily arrived.

It was certain now that they belonged either to Lerado's crowd or were part of the marshal's forces, but it was

too dark to see more than the bare outline of their forms. All doubt on this point was set at rest as one of them—the first one Buffalo Bill had seen—ran swiftly across the court towards the further door. He passed under the lamp, and the scout recognised Zeph Hubbert.

One by one they crossed the court after Zeph had disappeared through the doorway. Cody would have followed them; but at that moment three Mexicans came through, calling loudly for Concho. They were joined by Bas Rivers and half a dozen others. The former was evidently not in the best of humours, and roughly ordered the men to get to work. Buffalo Bill gathered that he was alarmed at the discovery of Wild Bill, not knowing but what a big force was close at hand who would prevent him from carrying off the silver.

The party hurried away, Rivers shouting for more men to come and help, when a rattle of revolver-shots echoed through the place, and a hubbub of furious cries broke out.

The rival bands had met, and a fight for mastery had commenced.

Determined to release Wild Bill if possible while the conflict was in progress, Buffalo Bill ran through a door in a quiet part of the building. He found himself in a long corridor lighted by a single lantern placed on a bracket. He snatched the lantern from its place and went rapidly down the corridor, opening door after door, but finding no occupant.

At last he came to one that was locked, which made it all the more likely that Wild Bill was in there.

Buffalo Bill placed his revolver against the lock and fired. The bolt was smashed, and the door opened readily. The lantern only threw a dim light through the long room, but sufficient to show a dark form lying motionless under the window.

"Thank Heaven, I've found you, Bill!" cried the scout, springing across to the place and quickly severing the rawhide thongs which bound Hickok hand and foot.

"You can't be half as thankful as I am!" Wild Bill replied, as soon as the

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gag was removed from his mouth. "What's happening, Cody? Are they cutting each other's throats?"

"It's Lerado's crowd, Bill. They started their game just as you were carried here. We had better get away while the rival scoundrels are hammering at each other."

The two scouts thereupon slipped from the room and soon reached the garden, whence they were able to make their way into the orange-grove.

"We'll stay round here a bit and see how the fight goes," Buffalo Bill whispered. "Shires is bound to be here soon, and we can corral the lot."

They lay hidden in a bed of tall pampas-grass watching the progress of the fight. Several of the Mexicans came close by them, as they all shifted their positions a good deal. From snatches of their conversation the scouts gathered that Lerado and his men had by sheer luck run for shelter to the very room in which the silver was stored. There did not appear to be more than six or seven of them, but they all fought well, and had so far foiled all the Mexicans' attempts to dislodge them.

How long the battle would have lasted it is difficult to say, had not a sudden diversion occurred.

This consisted of a loud burst of cheering and a deadly fusillade of shots from a third force of belligerents who came upon the scene like magic.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill instantly emerged from their cover and met Reuben Shires.

"We're in time, then, Cody?" cried the marshal. "We heard the firing and feared that we should be too late to help you."

"You're just in the nick of time, Rube, and I guess we'll stop the scoundrels' quarrel in short order," replied Buffalo Bill.

* * * * *

But little more remains to add.

The house was completely surrounded by Shires's men, and the rival bands of rogues were safely corralled.

A great number had been killed or wounded, and the remainder, seeing that resistance was useless, surrendered.

Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, and Reuben

Shires quickly ran to the apartment in which the bullion was stored, and found Lerado lying there dead.

A thorough search of the building, however, failed to reveal Bas Rivers, and a wounded Mexican stated that he had just escaped in a boat.

The silver was found to be intact, but old Angelo Frio was nowhere to be seen till the same wounded Mexican volunteered the information that there was a secret chamber in the old part of the building, and directed them to it. Here, sure enough, they found the old rascal in hiding, and as he refused to surrender, and wounded two of Reuben's posse, they shot him dead. Here they also found Brant, more dead than alive from the effects of the fearful treatment he had received from Bas Rivers and Frio.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode off to Arispe as soon as Brant was discovered, and procuring a boat with a good crew started off in chase of Bas Rivers. It would never do to let so dangerous a man escape while there was a chance to capture him, and they repeatedly urged the rowers on.

About five miles down the river the boat was discovered on a sandbank where she had drifted, and lying across one of the thwarts was the dead body of Bas Rivers. He had been wounded in five places, and had evidently bled to death.

The scouts returned to the old Mission, and later on accompanied the marshal and his prisoners, with the recovered silver, back to Silver City.

The excitement which prevailed among the residents when they learned the extraordinary plot instigated by the widely-respected Carlos Lerado can be better imagined than described.

THE END.

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